BRIEFING STATEMENT
BLM-MONTANA/DAKOTAS
MONTANA STATE OFFICE · 5001 SOUTHGATE DRIVE · BILLINGS, MONTANA 59101 · WWW.BLM.GOV/MT

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BLM LANDSCAPE APPROACH AND DOI LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION COOPERATIVES

I. SUMMARY:

Historically, BLM land use policies and authorizations have been driven by national and local considerations with most land use decisions made and implemented at the local field office level. Many resource issues and the effects of management actions often extend across field office, state, or other jurisdictional boundaries. These challenges include managing wildfire; controlling weeds and insect outbreaks; providing for energy development and urban growth; and addressing pervasive impacts from the effects of climate change. The BLM is developing a landscape-scale management approach to better understand these challenges and support balanced stewardship of the diverse natural resources of the public lands.

II. BACKGROUND:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) are conservation-science partnerships between the Service, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and other federal agencies, states, tribes, non-governmental organizations, universities ,and stakeholders within a geographically defined area.

With current ecological understanding and new analytical tools, the BLM will systematically identify landscape-scale, ecologically-based conservation and restoration needs, which will be considered as future resource management objectives are developed.

This Landscape Approach has three major components:

1. Rapid Ecoregional Assessment (REA): Rapid ecoregional assessments are collaborative scientist/manager exercises that assemble and synthesize targeted spatial information about an ecoregion. This will help identify areas with high ecological value and potential for change so that managers can make decisions on these priority situations and guide habitat conservation strategies. The focus is on three ecological values: fish, wildlife, and plants of conservation concern; regionally important terrestrial features; and regionally important aquatic features. The risks to these ecological values are evaluated with four change agents: fire, invasive species, development, and climate change.

2. Formulation of Ecoregional Assessment Initial Responses: BLM managers and resource specialists will work with assessment scientists and others (e.g., partners, stakeholders) to formulate a regional response or plan of action using information gained during the rapid ecoregional assessment.

3. Implementation of Ecoregional Initial Responses: Five types of implementation actions are developed--Conduct Sub-Assessments; Develop Proposed Resource Management Strategies and Actions; Conduct Needed Planning and Environmental Compliance Activities; Implement Resource Management Strategies and Actions; and/or Carry Out Inventories, Research, Monitoring, and Reporting.

Montana/Dakotas BLM contracted two assessments in 2010 with Scientific American International Corporation (SAIC). The Northwestern Great Plains Assessment covers the eastern two-thirds of Montana and large parts of Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota. This area is a stronghold for greater sage-grouse; contains important migratory bird habitat including the prairie potholes; has a series of important plains communities; and faces threats from energy development, fragmentation, migratory barriers, invasive species, increased fire risk, and climate change.

The Middle Rockies Assessment will cover the western third of Montana and large portions of Wyoming and Idaho. This ecoregion is an important link between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Crown of the Continent. Important dispersal corridors for grizzly bears, lynx, wolverines, wolves, and other sensitive species relying on these forest and valley systems are threatened by endemic insects and diseases which are increasing fire risk and changing the landscape. The assessment will help prioritize areas for conservation and develop management strategies at a landscape scale to create communities that are resilient to change.

This broader perspective will help focus and integrate local management efforts and provide an important foundation for developing coordinated management strategies with partner agencies, stakeholders, and American Indian tribes. Partnerships are critical to addressing landscape issues and engaging in successful resource stewardship where responses need to be planned and implemented across land ownerships.

Montana/Dakotas BLM is also an active participant in two LCCs, the Great Northern LCC and the Plains and Prairie Potholes LCC. Initial efforts focused on creating action plans and assembling the science needs and capacities of the major natural resource agencies and partnerships in the region. These LCCs continue to develop by adding new partners and continuing work on science needs assessments. Prioritization of capacity, science and other needs is ongoing, and funding will be provided this year for some project work. In addition, the information gathered will help guide LCC steering committees in determining the best way to connect landscape level efforts with on-the-ground conservation. The BLM will remain engaged in developing the partnership and providing an avenue for development of needed landscape level conservation science, such as through conducting REAs.

The LCCs and the BLM's landscape approach are complementary efforts that are working together to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of conservation actions. The LCC provides a forum to share information, leverage resources, and identify data gaps and questions. This forum is vital to the REAs, which will integrate and build on Western Governors Association initiatives, state forestry assessments, and landscape work from federal and non-federal partners. Assessment products are then available to the partnership to help inform decisions.

In response to landscape level stressors (invasive species, wildland fire, development, climate change, etc.), increased cooperation and adequate tools are needed to identify priority areas for landscape conservation and prioritize science needed to manage lands appropriately to maintain sustainable and diverse communities of fish, wildlife, and plants. Montana/Dakotas BLM recognizes the importance of cooperative conservation and adaptive management and will utilize the latest science and techniques to manage landscapes for multiple uses.

III. PUBLIC INTEREST:
Development of landscape level datasets and tools will help guide the BLM in prioritizing and locating restoration efforts through programs such as Healthy Landscapes, in addition to managing National Landscape Conservation Units to preserve their ecological values. Opportunities for partnerships in development of the REAs and LCCs will help effectively develop and implement landscape scale conservation strategies.

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